

Support us

Sign in

US

News | Opinion | Sport | Culture | Lifestyle



Israel-Gaza war

'I'm coming to a place that looks like hell': the long road home for Gaza's displaced

After 15 months of war, many people in north Gaza know they are returning to a wasteland

Malak A Tantesh in Gaza and **Emma Graham-Harrison** in Jerusalem

Tue 28 Jan 2025 15.04 EST

For Abdulaziz the return to Sheikh Radwan in northern [Gaza](#) was bittersweet. His home was still standing, if damaged, but the life he built around it had been utterly destroyed by 15 months of Israeli attacks.

Relatives, friends, acquaintances are dead. His job as manager of a car rental business is gone because the cars, the office and all their equipment have been destroyed. He is traumatised by more than a year of war and life as a refugee.

“My experience in this war is beyond words. It’s been nothing short of devastating in every way,” the 24-year-old said. “I lost everything I worked for.”

The hope that it was finally finished, that a fragile ceasefire could be made permanent, kept him going as he trudged back toward the ruins of his home town. His first plan is to visit the graves of loved ones killed by Israeli airstrikes and attacks.

“Now I can finally return to the north. All of this suffering feels somewhat bearable with the hope that the war is over,” he said. “All I can say is, thank God. The exhaustion from the long walk will fade into nothing the moment I finally set foot in my own home.”



📷 Most returning north knew what lay ahead and preferred it to life in overcrowded camps or shelters in the south. Photograph: Enas Tantesh/The Guardian

Northern Gaza is the most damaged area in a ravaged strip, and the vast crowds trudging along beside the Mediterranean knew they were returning to a wasteland.

Their desperation to get back was testament to the horrors they had endured during their displacement, moving between overcrowded shelters and makeshift camps.

“I know I’m coming back to a place that looks like hell with destruction all around,” said 25-year-old Raed Said Sobeh, who had been displaced five times during the war. He knew his home was gone, but wanted to kiss the ground where it had been.

“Despite everything, we’ve returned to Gaza, defying the occupation! I feel like I’m in heaven! I’ll pitch a tent right on top of the rubble where my home once stood.”

He waited with thousands of others through the bitter cold of a January night, outside the seaside checkpoint that for more than a year had sealed off access to the north, where people would be allowed through on foot. Vehicles lined up outside a second crossing, farther east.

The crowd carried what they had salvaged from the war - bedding, clothes and a little food. Some burned their tents, others handed them over to friends and family, before setting off towards a beach road once used to travel for family outings, weekend picnics and parties before the war.

At 7am the checkpoint opened and the displaced began to pour out, streaming down all the roads that lead to the beach, joy mixing with sorrow, everyone already exhausted before they had started the long march north.

The multitudes of people threw up clouds of dust from the dirty road, turning clothes and faces a greyish hue. The crowd was so big that some children lost their families in the crush.

They wandered, crying through the column, but with the phone network down, even those carrying mobiles could not ring for help. Sally Abu Warda, 36, was waiting by the road outside Gaza City for her husband, praying he would return soon with her stepson.

“At the start of the day, we were so happy because we were finally going back to our home in Jabalia. We woke up excited, packed our belongings, and set out with energy and enthusiasm. But then something turned our entire day upside down,” she said.





A girl holding Palestinian flag en route to north Gaza. Photograph: Enas Tantesh/The Guardian

“In the chaos of the crowds, we lost my stepson, and we haven’t found him yet. He’s just a little boy, unaware of much around him, and he has special needs. He can’t see clearly. I pray my husband finds him. My heart is breaking for him.”

Elderly people struggled. Some were pushed in carts or wheelchairs, or carried on the shoulders of relatives, but several trying to make the journey on foot collapsed.

“I told you not to go today, but you insisted,” one man said, weeping as he remonstrated at the roadside with a father who could no longer hear him, and begged passersby for help.

His dad was in his seventies with high blood pressure and diabetes, he said, but there were no medics nearby and no one could get through to the ambulance services. Increasingly desperate, the son urged the unconscious man: “Come on, let’s continue the journey. You’re not dead, wake up.”





People on the long walk home. Photograph: Enas Tantesh/The Guardian

Eyad Saleha, a 43-year-old tailor, also wept beside the road during a break a few kilometres up the coast, but said he was overwhelmed as much by happiness as by exhaustion.

“We walk for a while, then rest before continuing. We can’t complete the journey in one go because the road is long, but our joy gives us the energy to keep going,” he said. “We don’t feel the fatigue or the length of the journey. I have been crying non-stop, I can’t hold back my tears of happiness.”

One masked fighter from the military wing of [Hamas](#), among several lining the route, claimed the march home as a show of triumph. “Our return is a resounding victory, which will strike the head of Netanyahu and his impotent ministers,” he said.

Israel launched the war after Hamas’s cross-border attacks on 7 October, and the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has repeatedly called for “total destruction” of the militant group as a key aim.



Hamas militants among the crowds of people returning to the north. Photograph: Enas Tantesh/The Guardian

It was almost 10 km to Gaza City, where those travelling farther north hoped to find cars or motorcycle carts to take them on. But its ruined roads were empty of vehicles, so they forced themselves to press on by foot.

Conditions in the north are even worse than in the south of Gaza. Israel maintained a blockade within a blockade against Gaza City and the areas around it, allowing even fewer shipments of food and other aid than reached the south. Last autumn, humanitarian organisations warned a famine was “imminent” here.

Since the ceasefire agreement allowed an increase in aid shipments, humanitarian agencies have stockpiled supplies, including tents and food here, but warn that meeting even basic needs will be a huge challenge.

Most returning north knew what lay ahead and preferred it to life in overcrowded camps or shelters in the south. The suggestion by the US president, Donald Trump, that he would like to “clean out” Gaza only strengthened their determination.

“My relatives in the north warned me not to rush back, saying life is still difficult there with no water, no shelter, and immense destruction, but none of that matters to me,” said Yasser Hamdouna from al-Nasr neighbourhood, who worked as a distributor before the war.

“I will never go through this experience again, even if they threaten to destroy my house over my head,” the 40-year-old said. “I’d rather die with dignity in my home among my family than endure the humiliation and displacement we suffered during this war.”

Article count **on**

You've read 5 articles in the last year

Why you can rely on the Guardian not to bow to Trump - or anyone

I hope you appreciated this article. Before you move on, I wanted to ask whether you could support the Guardian’s journalism as we begin to cover the second Trump administration.

As Trump himself observed: “The first term, everybody was fighting me. In this term, everybody wants to be my friend.”

He’s not entirely wrong. All around us, media organizations have begun to capitulate. First, two news outlets pulled election endorsements at the behest of their billionaire owners. Next, prominent reporters bent the knee at Mar-a-Lago. And then a major network - ABC News - rolled over in response to Trump’s legal challenges and agreed to a \$16m million settlement in his favor.

challenges and agreed to a \$10m million settlement in his favor.

The Guardian is clear: we have no interest in being Donald Trump's - or any politician's - friend. Our allegiance as independent journalists is not to those in power but to the public. Whatever happens in the coming months and years, you can rely on the Guardian never to bow down to power, nor back down from truth.

How are we able to stand firm in the face of intimidation and threats? As journalists say: follow the money. The Guardian has neither a self-interested billionaire owner nor profit-seeking corporate henchmen pressuring us to appease the rich and powerful. We are funded by our readers and owned by the Scott Trust - whose only financial obligation is to preserve our journalistic mission in perpetuity.

What's more, we make our fearless, fiercely independent journalism free to all, with no paywall - so that everyone in the US can have access to responsible, fact-based news.

With the new administration boasting about its desire to punish journalists, and Trump and his allies already pursuing lawsuits against newspapers whose stories they don't like, it has never been more urgent, or more perilous, to pursue fair, accurate reporting. Can you support the Guardian today?

We value whatever you can spare, but a recurring contribution makes the most impact, enabling greater investment in our most crucial, fearless journalism. As our thanks to you, we can offer you some great benefits - including seeing far fewer fundraising messages like this. We've made it very quick to set up, so we hope you'll consider it. Thank you.

Betsy Reed

Editor, Guardian US



☐ **Support \$5/month**

☒ **Support \$15/month**

Recommended

Unlock **All-access digital** benefits:

Unlimited access to the Guardian app

Unlimited access to our new Feast App

Ad-free reading on all your devices

Read free reading on all your devices

Exclusive newsletter for supporters, sent every week from the Guardian newsroom

Far fewer asks for support

☐ **Support once from just \$1**

Continue →

Remind me in March

VISA



Most viewed
